

WHAT IS REDDIT'S HERMAN CAIN AWARD?

INDY/LIFE



The late Herman Cain
(Reuters)

Way back in 1993, at what now looks like the dawn of the internet, a website known as the [Darwin Awards](#) provided ghoulish entertainment by recounting the spectacular, surreal and often deeply ridiculous manner in which real people around the world had allegedly met their deaths.

Explaining the site's name and *raison d'être*, creator Wendy Northcutt, a University of California molecular biology graduate, declared on its homepage: "In the spirit of Charles Darwin, the Darwin Awards commemorate individuals who protect our gene pool by making the ultimate sacrifice of their own lives. Darwin Award winners eliminate themselves in an extraordinarily idiotic manner, thereby improving our species' chances of long-term survival."

The site's blackly comic tales of absurd accidental deaths was turned into a popular series of books by Northcutt from 2000 and it is still online today, recording fatal blunders in an amused style some readers might now find rather callous.

But in 2021, a more specific and much darker alternative exists on [Reddit](#), [r/HermanCainAward](#), dedicated to chronicling the deaths of those who have publicly declared their opposition to [Covid-19](#) vaccines, mask rules and lockdowns on social media, often in aggressively belligerent and politically-charged fashion, only to subsequently fall ill and pass away at the hands of the [coronavirus](#) themselves, their fate carrying with it an air of grim inevitability.

The subreddit, founded in October 2020 and attracting 339,000 followers at the time of writing, is named after the late [Herman Cain](#), an American fast food company executive who ran as a Republican presidential candidate in 2012 before being forced to abort his campaign in response to sexual misconduct allegations that he denied.

He remained active in right-wing US politics thereafter and was considered for a position on the board of the Federal Reserve by **Donald Trump**, for whom he remained a vocal cheerleader throughout his presidency, only for the businessman to meet his end when he attended Trump's disastrous rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, at the height of the pandemic on 20 June last year, unmasked and unrepentant.

Cain, 74, duly contracted the virus among the crowd in Tulsa and passed away on 30 July after spending a month in a coma.

While Herman Cain was hardly the first Covid refusenik to die from the disease, he became synonymous with the grandstanding hubris of the MAGA movement when his staff and family continued to use his personal Twitter account to downplay the coronavirus long after his funeral had taken place.

It was still pushing Republican talking points in his name **as recently as March this year**, often on issues like the **Joe Biden** presidency or the sexual harassment scandal surrounding New York governor **Andrew Cuomo**, events that the deceased himself had not lived long enough to see.

But Cain's most meaningful posthumous online legacy could be the r/HermanCainAward, a corner of the internet in which people congregate to post Facebook screenshots of antivaxxer anti-mask and anti-lockdown pronouncements from the conspiracy-minded who are subsequently hospitalised and often killed by the same deadly virus they had sought to debunk or insist had been invented by "globalists" to bring the world's population under the control of a sinister elite.

Too cruel? Too morbid? Too smug? For many, the r/HermanCainAward will be regarded as a gross act of performative schadenfreude that amounts to little more than needless provocation, causing further hurt and division at a time when a united front is required to finally see off the pandemic for good.

Asked about the subreddit by *Insider* this week, **a Reddit spokesperson said** it is "closely reviewing the Covid-related communities on our platforms for violations of our policies, including r/HermanCainAward".

But the very existence of the forum poses a challenging question about how exactly we should handle the memory of people who actively spread misinformation and baseless anti-

science paranoia about a free vaccine intended to safeguard the health of their fellow citizens, potentially endangering the lives of others by their actions.

Antivaxxers, however much one might disapprove of their political positions, are nevertheless people too and leave behind them bereaved families and friends and a trail of grief no less meaningful than that of those killed despite following the guidelines, getting vaccinated and attempting to stay safe. That they might not live to learn the error of their ways is surely punishment enough.

While a majority will feel the temptation to mock the sceptic dead should be resisted in the name of good taste and sensitivity, others might argue that the subreddit actually serves as a valuable cautionary tale, the stories it recounts providing a blunt warning that all readers would be well-advised to heed.

“I’m not anti-vax,” one commenter wrote on its pages, “I was just afraid and confused by all the misinformation out there. Genuinely frightened and confused. Taking a quick 5 minute look at this Sub-reddit brought me back down to earth. I’ll be getting my first round of the Pfizer vaccine early next week. Thank you for existing.”

Reporting on r/HermanCainAward for *Slate*, journalist Lili Loofbourow recently remarked on how chasening it was to “**see the suffering**” contained in its posts recording antivaxxers being taken ill, noting the graphic photos of the victims taken and uploaded by worried families members.

“Despite reading loads of statistics and case histories and news articles about the pandemic, r/HermanCainAward became my most thorough source on what it’s like for a person to die from Covid,” she said.

“I understand the disease more deeply because I have read so many viciously curated ‘stories’ in which ordinary people blathering about politics end up narrating their decline from it – with help from their families – as optimistically as they can.”

She also cites an overworked nurse using the forum to air her grievances about the conspiracy spreaders and articulate her frustration and exhausted reserves of compassion for those speaking out without having shared her traumatic frontline experiences as a carer.

R/HermanCainAward might be an uncomfortable read but the idea that it is providing a space for engagement with the hard realities of the pandemic cannot be easily dismissed.

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